

World War I and its Aftermath: Primary Source: Lesson 3 Wilson's Speech

Analyzing Primary and Secondary Sources Activity World War I and It's Aftermath, 1914–1920

Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points Speech to Congress, January 8, 1918

Background

President Wilson first presented his Fourteen Points in a speech to Congress on January 8, 1918. When the fighting stopped on November 11, 1918, the Germans signed an armistice. Designed to prevent another war, the Fourteen Points became part of the peace negotiations held at the Palace of Versailles the following year.

The first five of the Fourteen Points dealt with eliminating the conditions that led to the war while the next eight points dealt with the right of national self-determination, or the idea that the borders of countries should be based on ethnicity and national identity to help secure peace. The last of the Fourteen Points was the most important to Wilson, but was also among the most controversial. It called for the formation of an international association to promote world peace.

While Germany agreed to all Fourteen Points, it was the Allies who had major disagreements with the plan. The major issues were territory and reparations: the British didn't believe in complete freedom of the seas, and the British and French felt that Germany should be punished and pay severe reparations.

During the next five months, the original Fourteen Points were slowly eroded, but a peace agreement was finally signed on June 28, 1919. The final treaty punished Germany harshly—and even blamed Germany for the war.

Directions: Read the excerpt from President Wilson's Fourteen Points speech to Congress. Then answer the questions that follow.

We have no jealousy of German greatness, and there is nothing in this program that impairs it. We grudge her no achievement or distinction of learning or of pacific enterprise such as have made her record very bright and very enviable. We do not wish to injure her or to block in any way her legitimate influence or power. We do not wish to fight her either with arms or with hostile arrangements of trade, if she is willing to associate herself with us and the other peace-loving nations of the world in covenants of justice and law and fair dealing.

We wish her only to accept a place of equality among the peoples of the world—the new world in which we now live—instead of a place of mastery.

—President Wilson's speech to Congress, January 8, 1918

Critical Thinking

Name: _____ Class: _____ Date: _____

World War I and its Aftermath: Primary Source: Lesson 3 Wilson's Speech

1. Why would Wilson's feelings toward Germany be popular with his French and British counterparts?

2. Rewrite this section of Wilson's speech to reflect the attitude of the French at the time.

3. How do you think the Germans felt when the Fourteen Points they had initially agreed to change so dramatically?

Name: _____ Class: _____ Date: _____

World War I and its Aftermath: Primary Source: Lesson 3 Wilson's Speech

4. Was the first line of the excerpt from Wilson's speech still true after the peace talks at Versailles? What had changed?

5. Wilson was so determined to gain support for the League of Nations that he was willing to sacrifice other parts of the Fourteen Points. Judging by the passage, what was he hoping a League of Nations would achieve?

Name: _____ Class: _____ Date: _____

World War I and its Aftermath: Primary Source: Lesson 3 Wilson's Speech

Answer Key

1. France and Britain wanted the Germans to be punished for the suffering they'd inflicted on the rest of Europe. They did not want Germany treated as an equal.
2. Answers will vary, but should reflect anger and blame toward Germany.
3. Answers will vary, but should show an understanding that the terms were compromised for the Germans.
4. No. There were a number of conditions in the peace treaty that impaired Germany's greatness.
5. a new, fair organization in which all countries would be equal and have an equal say